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“Everybody’s happy” – Place attachment and visitors to the Ningaloo Reef, north-western Australia

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Introduction

As pressure on marine protected areas from recreational and tourism use continues to increase, so too does the importance of planning for and managing these experiences. Such experiences are a product of both the social and environmental values of the protected areas and the interaction of these values with visitor activities. Most experiential research has focused on terrestrial and riparian environments with little work undertaken in marine settings (Shafer & Inglis, 2000). This study explored the place attachment expressed by visitors camping adjacent to and recreating in a marine setting, Ningaloo Marine Park.

The Ningaloo Marine Park, abutting the north-western coastline of Australia, centres on a 300 km long fringing coral reef. A recent study by Beckley et al. (2008) examined human usage patterns of the Ningaloo Marine Park and identified that 55% of surveyed visitors had visited on a previous occasion and of this group, 44% always stayed at the same location. These results suggest that place attachment may have a strong influence on how visitors behave, what their expectations are and how they might respond to policy and management changes. Place attachment is the overarching concept used to describe an emotional or affective bond between a person and a place (Williams et. al. 1992).

Methodology

Photo-elicitation was used to identify elements contributing to place attachment at Ningaloo Marine Park. This qualitative method used photographs taken by the study participants to form the basis of a subsequent semi-structured interview (Jacobsen, 2007). Interviews were carried out at three sites adjacent to the Marine Park to target visitors using high, medium and low levels of facilities and services. Participants were restricted to those who had visited at least twice previously, based on the presumption that attachment can develop after one or more visits. A total of 30 visitors participated in the interview process.

Results

Preliminary results suggest that place attachment at Ningaloo Reef has four components: the physical environment; activities; social ties; and emotional connection with this categorisation based on Smaldone et. al. (2005). As many of the responses explaining the attachment fell within the emotional category, this category provides the focus for this paper. “Everybody’s happy” and an “ability to escape” were the predominant themes of this category.

“Everybody’s happy” related to how holidays at Ningaloo Reef were an enjoyable experience for all members of the respondent’s group. Each individual was able to create and enjoy their own experience at Ningaloo while being assured that others in their group were also enjoying their own holiday, not necessarily undertaking the same activities or having the same experiences. Participants commented that their location provided activities or experiences for everybody to enjoy. The physical environment was a key component of this, for example at one location there was a surf break as well as a safe lagoon for snorkelling, and both were within walking distance of the campsite. The convenience of having activities within walking distance of the campsite meant that visitors could enjoy their chosen activities at any time without imposing on others in their group. This also added to the “everybody’s happy” feeling.

The “ability to escape” centred on being away from everyday commitments such as telephone calls, emails and worries associated with work, and from domestic activities such as cooking and cleaning. Escaping was clearly important for respondents with families. Parents commented on how they were able to spend time and reconnect as a family as they were time-poor at home. Not having the distractions of work or everyday chores meant that they could spend time with their children in a relaxed state. They could also teach their children values in terms of respecting the environment and skills relating to camping and fishing, something that they may be unable to do elsewhere.

This research has provided useful insights into why these locations are important to visitors and in particular the strongly affective elements of place attachment. Place dependence, the importance of the setting in achieving desired goals (Williams et. al. 1992), is evident from these results as is the link between an emotional connection in place and place dependence. For those managing these coastal camping sites adjacent to Ningaloo, this suggests awareness and understanding of the emotional connections of visitors, to these sites and to each other, is essential.

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